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SUBJECT: AFRO-BRAZILIAN LEADERS DEBUNK MYTH OF RACIAL
DEMOCRACY IN BRAZIL

Summary

11. Two prominent members of the Afro-Brazilian community sat down with members of the Hyde CODEL (septel) on December 1 to discuss the business and political climate for black Brazilians. In a wide-ranging discussion, they explained how Brazil's electoral and educational systems work to prevent Afro Brazilians from accumulating political and economic power. The legacy of slavery also has hurt, depriving entrepreneurial blacks of family inheritances with which to launch businesses. Societal discrimination has limited job opportunities as well, because blacks are rarely hired for publicly-visible jobs, they said. Nevertheless, the participants identified numerous areas in which Afro-American and Afro-Brazilian businesses can forge stronger trading links, to help bring wealth and success to struggling communities. Overall, race in Brazil is a complex subject, in part because miscegenation (racial mixing) over subsequent generations has made it difficult to identify and categorize individuals according to skin color. End Summary.

12. Jurema Batista, the first Afro-Brazilian woman to serve in the Rio de Janeiro State Assembly, and Giovanni Harvey, director of an institution assisting young Afro-Brazilian entrepreneurs, sat down with members of the Hyde CODEL on December 1 to discuss business opportunities and the political climate for Brazil's black population. American participants included Representative Mel Watt (D-NC), Tom Lantos (D-Cal), Diane Watson (D-CAL), Luis Fortuno (R-PR), Eni Faleomavaega (D-AS), their staff members, as well as the Charge d'Affaires, the Consul General, Poloff, Commercial Officer, and Conoff, note taker.

Electoral System, Legacy of Slavery Impede

13. After introductions, Rio State Assemblywoman Batista opened by noting the disproportionately low numbers of blacks in business and politics. (Note: Estimates of the overall number of Brazilian blacks vary. Our participants offered the figure of 45 percent of the total population - an estimate at the high end of the spectrum. End Note.) The electoral system presents an informal barrier to the accumulation of political power, Batista explained. Because Brazilians tend to vote according to name recognition rather than party affiliation, candidates need to have access to wealth in order to be able to disseminate their name and publicize their platform to the masses. As a result, electoral winners are the ones who can "buy" the most votes by carrying out short-term community programs during the campaign. These programs are naturally targeted at poorer, more populated areas, which tend to be black. Such communities are the most vulnerable to this type of campaigning, since state-provided services are often lacking there. The longer-term result is that wealthy candidates, who are almost always white, are able to propagate themselves in power.

14. Both Brazilian participants said that the legacy of slavery has hurt Afro-Brazilian entrepreneurship. "We have no legacy of inheritance," explained Harvey, whose business development firm is called the Brazilian Business Incubator. "Most people from my generation have no inherited resources, so how can they start their own businesses?" Discriminatory hiring practices are an additional barrier, as blacks are often passed over for jobs with visibility because, according to Harvey, employers prefer individuals with lighter skin tones in positions that interface with the public. "Racial democracy is a myth," declared Batista. "What we have here is non-formal apartheid."

Education System Favors the Wealthy

15. In response to a question from Representative Watt about educational opportunities, the participants explained how Brazil's peculiar education system disadvantages the poor. Because of low pay, Brazil's public secondary schools do not tend to attract the best teachers. As a result, middle and upper class Brazilians usually send their children to private schools, which better prepare their graduates for Brazil's rigorous university entrance examination, the vestibular. Those who excel on the test tend to enroll in

public universities, which are considered the best in Brazil - and they are tuition-free. The ironic result of this system is that the students who pay the least for a university education tend to be from families who can afford to pay the most. Intelligent, hard-working black students are placed at a disadvantage if their families cannot send them to private secondary schools; if they cannot get into a public university, they suffer a double whammy, because now they must pay for a private university education. Many cannot afford it.

Forging Stronger Links With Afro-American Business

16. Several CODEL members asked Harvey to identify areas in which Afro-American and Afro-Brazilian businessmen could forge stronger trade relationships. "We've been looking for U.S. partners for 15 years, but earlier we did it the wrong way," he responded. Tourism and arts-and-crafts have the most potential, he explained, but "initially I was resistant because I wanted high value-added products. But this isn't the reality of Brazil. These areas have been successful. and we have to be pragmatic." Other areas worth exploring include gastronomy, civil construction, beauty products, retail businesses, transportation, and education and non-governmental organization (NGO) initiatives.

17. "Brazil is often mentioned as a country of the future," Harvey concluded. "This will only come true when the black segment can share power. We want a more comfortable place here. We want to take the future in our hands."

Comment

18. Racial discrimination definitely exists at the societal level in Brazil. Laws are on the books prohibiting it, and many Brazilians note that Brazil has tried harder than many multi-ethnic countries to foster a sense of racial equality. Members of different races mix in relaxed fashion and interracial relationships are common. Nevertheless, as our participants noted, significant (and in some cases systemic) impediments remain. Even getting a firm grip on the issue is a challenge; the historical mixing of groups dating back to colonial times makes it far more difficult to determine one's race here than in, say, the United States. Millions of Brazilians who in the U.S. might be considered blacks identify themselves as of mixed-race (or "mulatto") origin, for a number of reasons. Finally, many individuals of all colors reject state- or societal-imposed racial categorization schemes, preferring to identify themselves simply as Brazilians. The CODEL conversation illuminated many of the challenges Afro-Brazilians face, but some of the opinions expressed did not necessarily represent unanimously-held views - even among non-white Brazilians.

LIST